

OTA BENGGA: The man who was put on display in the zoo!

Jerry Bergman, Ph.D.

One of the most fascinating stories about the effects of evolution on human relations is the story of Ota Benga, a pygmy who was put on display in a zoo as an example of an evolutionarily inferior race. The incident clearly reveals the racism of evolutionary theory and the extent to which the theory gripped the hearts and minds of scientists.

The man who was put on display in a zoo was brought from the Belgian Congo in 1904 by noted African explorer Samuel Verner. The man, a pygmy named Ota Benga (or 'Bi', which meant 'friend' in his language), was soon 'presented by Verner to the Bronx Zoo director, William Hornaday. (1)

The pygmy was born in 1881 in Africa. When put in the zoo, he was 150 centimetres (4 feet 11 inches) tall, about 23 years old, and weighed a mere 47 kilos (103 pounds). Often referred to as a boy, he had been actually married twice—his first wife had been kidnapped by a hostile tribe, and his second had died from a poisonous snake bite. (2)

He was first displayed at the 1904 St Louis World's Fair, and was exhibited with other pygmies as 'emblematic savages' along with other 'strange people' in the anthropology wing. This first stop in America was influenced by what some have called 'Darwinism, Barnumism, and racism.' (3)

Ota Benga later ended up at the Bronx Zoo, where he was put on display in the monkey house. Although zoo director Hornaday insisted he was merely offering an 'intriguing exhibit' for the public's edification, he 'apparently saw no difference between a wild beast and the little Black man; for the first time in any American zoo, a human being was displayed in a cage. Benga was given cage-mates to keep him company in his captivity—a parrot and an Orangutan named Dohong'. (4)

Persuaded by Darwin's Theory

The factors motivating Verner to bring Ota Benga to the United States were complex, but he was evidently much influenced by the theory of Charles Darwin—which led to the division of humankind into contrived races. (5)

A contemporary account stated that Benga was 'not much taller than the orangoutan [sic] ... their heads are much alike, and both grin in the same way when pleased'. (6)

Benga had come over from Africa with a 'fine young chimpanzee', which Mr Verner also deposited 'in the ape collection at the Primates House'. (7) Hornaday's enthusiasm for his new exhibit was reflected in an article he wrote for the zoological society's bulletin, which began as follows:

'On September 9, a genuine African Pygmy, belonging to the sub-race commonly miscalled "the dwarfs," . . . Ota Benga is a well-developed little man, with a good head, bright eyes and a pleasing countenance. He is not hairy, and is not covered by the "downy fell" described by some explorers.... He is happiest when at work, making something with his hands.' (8)

He then tells about how he obtained him from Verner, who 'was specially interested in the Pygmies, having recently returned to their homes on the Kasai River the half dozen men and women of that race who were brought to this country by him for exhibition in the Department of Anthropology at the St Louis [World's Fair] Exposition.' (9)

It was widely believed at this time, even by eminent scientists, that blacks were evolutionarily inferior to Caucasians, but caging one in a zoo produced much publicity. (10) In Bridges' words:

'The Pygmy worked—or played—with the animals in a cage, naturally, and the spectacle of a black man in a cage gave a Times reporter the springboard for a story that worked up a storm of protest among Negro ministers in the city. Their indignation was made known to Mayor George B. McClellan, but he refused to take action. (11)

Some whites also became concerned about the 'caged Negro'. According to one author, part of the concern was because the 'men of the cloth feared...that the Benga exhibition might be used to prove the Darwinian theory of evolution'. (12) The objections were often vague, as in the words of *The New York Times* of September 9, 1906:

Pygmies Rated Low on 'Human Scale'

'The exhibition was that of a human being in a monkey cage. The human being happened to be a Bushman, one of a race that scientists do not rate high in the human scale, but to the average nonscientific person in the crowd of sightseers there was something about the display that was unpleasant.... It is probably a good thing that Benga doesn't think very deeply. If he did it isn't likely that he was very proud of himself when he woke in the morning and found himself under the same roof with the orangoutangs [sic] and monkeys, for that is where he really is.'

Although a variety of opinions, existed about the incident, it created many protests and the threat of legal action. So the zoo director finally acquiesced, and 'allowed the pygmy out of his cage'.(13) Once let out, Ota Benga spent most of his days walking around the zoo grounds in a white suit, often with huge crowds following him, and returned to the monkey house only to sleep at night.

Being treated as a curiosity, mocked and made fun of by the visitors, eventually caused Benga to 'hate being mobbed by curious tourists and mean children'.(14) Zoo director Hornaday, in a letter to Verrier, revealed the problems that the situation had caused:

'Of course we have not exhibited him (Benga) in the cage since the trouble began. Since dictating the above, we have had a great time with Ota Benga. He procured a carving knife from the feeding room of the Monkey House, and went around the Park flourishing it in a most alarming manner, and for a longtime refused to give it up. Eventually it was taken away from him.

'Shortly after that he went to the soda fountain near the Bird House, to get some soda, and because he was refused the soda he got into a great rage.... This led to a great fracas. He fought like a tiger, and it took three men to get him back to the monkey house. He has struck a number of visitors, and has "raised Cain" generally.'

Fired Arrows at Obnoxious Gawkers

The pygmy later made a little bow and some arrows and began shooting at zoo visitors whom he found particularly obnoxious. 'After he wounded a few gawkers, he had to leave the Zoological Park for good.' (15) *The New York Times* of September 18, 1906, described the problem:

'There were 40,000 visitors to the park on Sunday. Nearly every man, woman and child of this crowd made for the monkey house to see the star attraction in the park ? the wild man from Africa. They chased him about the grounds all day, howling, jeering, and yelling. Some of them poked him in the ribs, others tripped him up, all laughed at him.' (16)

Although Hornaday claimed he was 'merely offering an interesting exhibit and that Benga was happy...', *The Encyclopedia of Evolution* notes that this statement 'could not be confirmed' as there was no record of Benga's feelings.(17)

Ota Benga unfortunately left no written record of his thoughts about the affair. Thus the only side of the story we have is in Verner's voluminous records, the newspaper accounts, and the writings of Hornaday.

We are not lacking information about the incident—many articles survive on the case, and a 281-page book entitled *The Pygmy in the Zoo* was recently published about Ota's zoo experience by Phillip Verner Bradford, Verner's grandson.

'Freak' Label Leads to Suicide

After Ota Benga left the zoo, he was able to find sympathetic care at a succession of institutions and with several sympathetic individuals. But he was never able to shed his 'freak' label. Employed in a tobacco factory in Lynchburg, Virginia, Ota Benga grew increasingly depressed, hostile, irrational, and forlorn. Concluding that he

would never be able to return to his native land, in 1916 Benga committed suicide by shooting himself with a borrowed pistol.

The story of his suicide was published by Hornaday in a 1916 *Zoological Bulletin*. Even at this late date, Hornaday's evolution-inspired racist feelings clearly showed through. He even stated that 'the young negro was brought to Lynchburg about six years ago, by some kindly disposed person, and was placed in the Virginia Theological Seminary and College here, where for several years he *labored to demonstrate to his benefactors that he did not possess the power of learning*; and some two or three years ago he quit the school and went to work as a laborer' (emphasis mine). (18)

Hornaday then recounts that, after leaving college, Ota lived at a 'colored home' near the school, earning his livelihood by working as a laborer in a tobacco factory. In Hornaday's words, the suicide was committed because 'the burden became so heavy that the young Negro secured a revolver belonging to the woman with whom he lived, went to the cow stable and there sent a bullet through his heart, ending his life.'

The story of Ota Benga is one of the many tragic fruits of evolutionism. But it is one which contains a lesson in helping us to realize the importance of the Christian teaching that all men are brothers, all descendants of Adam and Eve. If all Christians had stood up for creation at the outset of the Ota Benga incident, this horror story of evolutionary racism might have been averted.

References

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12. Same as Ref. 1.
13. *ibid*.
14. Richard Milner, *The Encyclopedia of Evolution: Humanity's Search For Its Origins*, Facts of File, Inc., New York, 1990, p. 42.
15. *ibid*.
16. Same as Ref. 3, p. 269.
17. Same as Ref. 14.
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